Ghazaleh Pascale,
Fortunes urbaines et stratégies sociales. Généalogies patrimoniales au Caire 1780-1830.

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This is a book about a small number of Cairo's « great merchants » (*grands négociants*, *tuǧǧār*) and how they lived through the period of transition from 1780 to 1830 that saw the end of the neo-Mamluk regime, a brief French occupation, the Ottoman reconquest and the establishment of Muḥammad 'Alī as ruler of Egypt (p. 12). Historiography counts this group of professionals as among the losers of these turbulent times, because they had disappeared from the political scene by 1830. It was the new ruler and the emerging class made up of his bureaucrats who acted from then on as Egypt's chief traders, establishing monopolies and relying on trade networks that also increasingly included foreign nationals.

In this study, which is based on her PhD thesis (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris in 2004), Pascale Ghazaleh, now associate professor of history at the American University in Cairo, set out to provide a new perspective on this pivotal yet under-researched period of Egyptian history. Expressing some dissatisfaction with former historiography and its strong focus on the political (p. 7-10, 656), she proposes to write a social history of this narrowly circumscribed elite group, which dates from the ancien régime, and is not of one of the more frequently studied new creations of the reforms under Muḥammad 'Alī. Her approach is firmly grounded on the notion of individual agency and combines an interest in both what makes individuals function as a group and the range of choices open to an individual in changing societal and political contexts : « Comment les anciennes élites, et tout particulièrement les commerçants qui avaient fait fortune avant 1805, composèrent-ils avec les politiques économiques instituées à partir de 1810 ? » (p. 37).

To enter this world of overlapping, volatile and sometimes competing relationships, Ghazaleh chooses to focus on property and the ways in which it was passed from one person to another or to institutions of various kinds. Property serves as a tool for shedding light on what bound people together, rather than taking preconceived notions such as family, kinship or slavery as a starting point. The study is based on a close reading of Ottoman court documents, in the main what seem to be about a dozen probate inventories, a few *waqf* deeds and various kinds of contracts.

The argument also relies heavily on information gleaned from the chronicle of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (d. 1825), which spans the period up to 1820. The extent to which this source contributes colour and detail to the narrative becomes clear from a comparison with the remaining ten years of the period under investigation, which the chronicle does not cover. Although it is probably the best known insider source for this time period, some critical remarks by way of introduction to its value for this particular inquiry would have been useful.

The study is divided in three parts. The first is a discussion of the problems related to situating an individual in Ottoman-Egyptian society of the time, and of "identifying" him or her. The second part examines the means of accumulating a private fortune (*patrimoine*) that were available to merchants such as the father and son, Aḥmad and Muḥammad al-Maḥrūqī : « Les Maḥrūqī cumulèrent dans leurs trajectoires professionnelles les quatre sources de la richesse urbaine (la rente, les salaires, les profits et les intérêts) que nous nous sommes proposée d'étudier, et constituent, à cet égard, un cas d'étude privilégié… » (p. 37). The third part proceeds with a demonstration of the numerous ways in which property was devolved from one person to others – not only legal heirs, but also other persons and the state and religious institutions – by confiscation, making gifts or bequests, endowments (*waqf*), credit operations, selling and buying and other means.

The first part, entitled « Nommer (naming) », is devoted to a critical examination of the categories used to describe individuals. In raising various problems related to identifying a person's place in the social fabric, Ghazaleh first re-examines notions of family based on what can be learned from the relationships evoked in the documents under investigation. This allows her to point to the relatively open nature of social practice, which cannot be reduced to one single concept determined by Qur'anic, juridical or biological constructs of belonging. Next comes a discussion of the merchants' status as « military (*'askarī*) », which in Ottoman usage applied not only to members of the army, but also to various other social groups, prominently among them all kinds of servants of the state. By the end of the period under investigation, those included in this category had become functionaries of a modern bureaucratic state. This development had profound repercussions for the position of the merchants, particularly their leaders (*prévôt*, *shāhbandar*) : they were displaced from the various functions they had held under the *ancien régime*, which had allowed them a broad range of manoeuvring, including as army leaders and suppliers, diplomats, concessionaires, monopolists and

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tax-farmers. Under the new rule, the spheres of trade, military affairs and administration became separated, and the remaining merchants had to develop new strategies to defend at least their economic position (p. 234-236).

Such strategies are addressed in the second part of the study, entitled « Posséder (owning) », whose first chapter analyses investments in urban landed property and buildings, be they of a residential, commercial or "religious" character. A discussion of the various ways to control landed property, by buying and selling, renting or endowing land and buildings, and even dealing in the rights to use either or both of them and the spaces they contained, leads into a consideration of the « economy of rights », which constituted a prominent feature of exchange relations at that time (p. 318-429).

The means to pass on a fortune (*patrimoine*), once assembled, is the focus of the third part, named « Devoir (being obligated) ». The position that traders held as intermediaries between the state and the tax-paying population made their property liable to the risk of confiscation by the ruler. But although the growing power of the centralising state was one reason for the precariousness of their wealth, this was also the consequence of the very means they used to build it. In what is perhaps her most original chapter, Ghazaleh presents an interesting examination of the functions of credit and debt within what she as just before described as an "economy of rights". Credit operations and loans of various types involved not only the state and business partners, but also close kin and other relations. She convincingly argues that, in the legal and political context of the times, incurring debts was a privileged means to secure the transmission of a fortune to persons and institutions of one's choice, among them children, sons in particular, as well as freed slaves and business associates. Such transactions remained outside the spheres of testate or intestate succession which were ruled by the rather strict norms of inheritance because the claims of a creditor were prioritized in the legal settlement of a debtor's estate.

The volume finishes with a glossary, a set of tables that includes a « genealogical » table of the relationships between the most important protagonists (which would be more useful if it provided also dates), the reproduction of the first page of a probate inventory and five maps. Unfortunately, there are no indices whatsoever, which makes it impossible to follow the trajectory of the individuals that Ghazaleh makes the focus of her project.

It is difficult to overestimate the value of this research project in several respects: in looking at a period of transition that is often neglected because it lies on the dividing line between two fields of scholarly specialisation, Ghazaleh is able convincingly to show what such a transition meant to specific people and a particular social group in terms of their material situation, highlighting adaptation and resilience in a context of narrowing possibilities. The decision to accompany select individuals – men and women, free-born and slaves – through this period of turmoil creates an opportunity to approach the broad range of topics that need to be considered in order to understand their range of action and the constraints that guided their choices.

However, the breadth of topics addressed in this study is also the source of some of its weaknesses. This reader sometimes found it difficult to stay focused through the numerous overviews taken from scholarly literature (It is not helpful either that footnotes have been replaced by endnotes for each chapter in these lengthy 700-page two volumes.) The ways in which particular case studies are tied in with general statements are not always convincing – for example, the remarks pertaining to the special tax status of pieces of urban land (p. 300). The documentary base of the project is rather small and the results derived from it are sometimes presented in ways that are difficult to understand (see, for example, Table 23, p. 548, which remains rather enigmatic even after reading through the explanations in the text). Though Ghazaleh does not attribute any representative value to this data, her narrative abounds in figures that could often have been presented more satisfactorily than in long enumerations within the text itself. Strangely enough, and this is in marked contrast to Nelly Hanna's often quoted work about the 16th-century merchant Abu Taqiyya, the individuals presented remain rather formless and hazy throughout the study.

In addition, some of the legal and procedural aspects of the documents that are examined are not presented convincingly, not to speak of the numerous misspellings of basic Arabic terms, which sometimes detracts from the argument. To quote just a few from one chapter : *rawḥ*, for « soul », should be *rūḥ* (p. 444) ; *nāẓir(a) ḥasbī(ya)* or *ḥisbī(ya)* (p. 465, 488) probably does not designate a « directrice financière » or « gérant financier », but an unsalaried supervisor (*ḥisbatan li-llāh*) ; and in the context of a lawsuit, *fī wajh* should not be translated merely « in the presence » of the representative of the Treasury (p. 477), but either in favour or against his claims, according to the whole phrase which is not given in the text.

Though these may seem petty considerations, they raise some questions about the use of the archival material in this study that claims to pay particular

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attention to the documents and the conditions of their production. The use of scholarly literature, especially from a more comparative perspective, is selective and heavily biased towards early-modern Europe, and in places seems rather haphazard. A number of seminal reference works are missing, so that at least some of the results of the study may seem more original than they really are: for example, the importance of debt and credit networks, particularly for merchant families and merchant family firms, has already been pointed out by Christopher A. Bayly in his study about merchant families in the Indian subcontinent during the same time period (*Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars. North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870*, Cambridge 1983). It merited more than an allusion in a reference to the « Portuguese Nation » in the Atlantic world (p. 604, n. 133). The same is true for the notion of an Islamic 'inheritance system' (« '*système*' *de l'héritage* », p. 443) that encompasses the legal means to transfer property described above, which was introduced by David S. Powers in his article « The Islamic Inheritance System. A Socio-Historical Approach » (in Chibli Mallat and Jane Connors [eds.] : *Islamic Family Law*, London, 1990, p. 11–29). It also does not figure in the bibliography.

These critical remarks, however, do not diminish the over-all value of this study, which corroborates the need to look beyond conventional categorisations. The fully developed economy of rights described here warrants further research into its development in various regional settings. Pascale Ghazaleh's study is therefore a recommended read, not only for those interested in merchants and their families and households, but for all historians working on Middle-Eastern history, in both the early-modern and modern periods.

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